

# PHYLON

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Third Quarter, 1941

Vol. II, No. 3

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By DANTES BELLEGARDE

## President Alexandre Petion

**Founder of Agrarian Democracy in Haiti and Pioneer of Pan-Americanism**

THE history of Haiti is dominated by four great men who fought and worked for its independence: Toussaint Louverture, Dessalines, Christophe and Pétion. Toussaint is the best known of them all because his extraordinary genius and spectacular career have engaged the attention of numerous authors. From a variety of angles they have related the story of this one-time slave who became the governor-general of the French colony of Santo Domingo only to die a captive in a dungeon of the Jura Mountains.

The career of Dessalines was scarcely less dramatic than that of Toussaint, for it was he who led to decisive victory the Negroes and mulattoes, united in the sacred struggle for freedom. Christophe, who became King of Haiti and revealed great administrative powers, is principally known in the United States by the public works which he constructed in the Northern Kingdom. The most remarkable of these is the Citadelle Laferrière, which has justly been called one of the wonders of America.

Of these four remarkable men Alexandre Pétion is the least known in the United States, but his name is revered in Latin America. In fact, he has played a role of first importance in the history of the New World, as I hope to demonstrate in this short biography, which I am writing for PHYLON.<sup>1</sup>

### I

Alexandre Pétion was born at Port-au-Prince, April 2, 1770, the son of a mulatto woman and a white man, Pascal Sabès, who, considering his

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<sup>1</sup>Translated by W. Geter Thomas.

son too dark of skin, refused to recognize him. His elementary education was very inadequate because the whites had not established schools in the colony of Saint Domingue. He learned the trade of silversmith from one of his father's old friends, M. Guiole, a native of Bordeaux, whose wife showed much solicitude for the young boy. She called him Pichoun, which in her southern patois meant *mon petit*, "my little one," whence the name Pétion, by which he continued to be known and which he finally adopted as his own.

Associating at an early age with the non-commissioned officers of the garrison at Port-au-Prince, young Alexandre took a liking to the military profession, and became particularly interested in the artillery. When he was eighteen he joined the militia. In 1791 he took part in the uprising of the Freedmen against white colonists. He distinguished himself at the battle of Pernier, not only by his calm courage, but also by his chivalrous spirit which prompted him to expose himself to the guns of his own soldiers in order to save the lives of French officers who had been taken prisoner. Pétion served as a non-commissioned officer under Rigaud during the civil war of 1800, which was the unfortunate result of a breach between Toussaint Louverture and Rigaud, who then commanded the Southern Province. He valiantly defended the town of Jacmel, attacked by a large army under the command of Dessalines, and made a sortie which military experts of the time considered a remarkable operation. His commander having been defeated, Pétion went to France where he used his enforced leisure to complete his knowledge of ballistics.

When Bonaparte decided to send a powerful army to Santo Domingo to overthrow the power of Toussaint, Pétion, with many other officers who were followers of Rigaud, enlisted in the expeditionary force. As head of the artillery battalion in the division of General Debelle, he took part in the siege of the fort of La Crête-à-Pierrot, one of the most famous episodes in the history of Haiti.

Bonaparte had given secret instructions to his brother-in-law, General Leclerc, commander-in-chief of the expeditionary army, first to get rid of Toussaint Louverture and the black leaders, both Negroes and mulattoes, and then to re-establish slavery, which had been officially abolished in the French Colonies by an act of the Convention Nationale in 1793. Toussaint, defeated, was drawn into a trap, deported to France, and imprisoned in the fort of Joux in the Jura. He died of cold and privation, April 7, 1803, after ten months of rigorous captivity.

The first part of the French program having been accomplished by the deportation of the man who was justly called "le Premier des Noirs," Leclerc took steps to continue the policy which had been prescribed to him by the French Government. He had the natives disarmed. In all parts of the territory, mass executions took place. There was a reign of terror

as bloody as the most horrible days of the French Revolution. The colonists openly talked of the imminent re-establishment of slavery. These rumors and rigorous measures created among the blacks a general feeling of anxiety and insecurity.

The mountaineers were the first to come to the point of revolt. They were soon joined in their mountain camps by the natives of the towns. The black and mulatto officers who were still serving in the French army began to understand, by unmistakable signs, that their lives were in danger. Some of them, who were embarked on battleships under the pretext of missions to fulfill, were heard of no more. Others deserted.

Pétion was commander of a division at this time and was quartered at Haut-du-Cap, several kilometers from the town of Cap-Français, where the commander-in-chief, Leclerc, had his headquarters. In the first days of October, 1802, he received an unexpected visit from Dessalines, his former adversary in the civil war of 1800, and three days after their secret conversation, Pétion took up arms against the French. The intervention of Pétion had the happy result of developing and hastening the movement of insurrection. The first to recognize the authority of Dessalines as general-in-chief of the Army of Independence, he drew to the latter all the mulatto officers, his companions in the Southern War. Very popular, moreover, with the chiefs of the bands of Negroes known as *maroons*,<sup>2</sup> of which the majority detested Dessalines, Pétion was able to rally them to the common cause of liberty.

In declaring war on the French, Alexandre Pétion distinguished himself by an act of generosity which the French General Pamphile de Lacroix related with admiration: he sent back to the French lines the European officers and soldiers who were serving under him, since he did not wish to force them to fight against their own country.<sup>3</sup>

During the month of May, 1803, Pétion, whom Dessalines had assigned to the mission of organizing the campaign in the West, convoked an assembly of the officers who were operating in this region. The meeting took place, with Dessalines presiding, at Archaie, a little town situated to the north of Port-au-Prince. Its purpose was to consolidate the authority of Dessalines and to co-ordinate the various activities necessary to assure the final liberation of the country. During this meeting, on May 18, and by recommendation of Pétion, the bi-colored Haitian flag was officially created. Tearing from the French flag the white band, which in the eyes of the insurrectionists represented the white colonists, Dessalines brought

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<sup>2</sup>The maroons were fugitive slaves who took refuge in the mountains and inaccessible places. They formed groups, which under energetic leadership, attacked the plantations of the

whites and sometimes dared to face regular troops.

<sup>3</sup>Cited by the Haitian General Nemours, in an article in *La Phalange*, April 16, 1940.

together the blue and red as a symbol of the union of Negroes and mulattoes. Thanks to this union the independence of Haiti was about to become a reality.

After numerous engagements in which the Army of Independence proved its military worth, and of which the most glorious was the battle which Dessalines fought against General Rochambeau and his troops at Vertières, the French were finally forced to capitulate. November 29, 1803, the Army of Independence entered the capital in triumph. On December 4, the last French regiments left Mole-Saint-Nicolas, exactly four hundred and eleven years after Christopher Columbus had anchored in this bay.

## II

January 1, 1804, on the *place d'armes* of the town of Gonaives, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the erstwhile slave whose body still showed scars from the lashings of his master's whip, proclaimed the independence of the former colony of Santo Domingo, which took its Indian name of Haiti. This proclamation marked both the birth of the second independent nation in America and the entrance of a Negro people into the society of civilized nations. It affirmed human liberty by condemning slavery and consecrating itself to the equality of races.

The new State entered international life under most difficult conditions. It had issued from a violent revolution which had lasted several years. Its leaders were soldiers who had received no political nor administrative education. Its population of 400,000 was composed for the most part of former slaves who had learned from the colonial régime only the deplorable concept that "the master is the man who does not work; being free means not working." The wealth of the country had almost entirely disappeared in the campaign of systematic destruction and massacre which had been ordered by Dessalines as the surest means of obtaining victory. There were no schools, no social nor economic organization. Moreover, having violently condemned slavery, the young nation was immediately the object of the hostility of all those states possessing slaves in America.

The first head of the Haitian state, Dessalines, received the title of Governor-for-Life. As this recalled too vividly the colonial régime, in September, 1804, he imitated Napoleon and had himself proclaimed Emperor under the title of Jacques I. He reigned dictatorially until October 17, 1806, when he fell victim of a military conspiracy.

At the death of Dessalines, the imperial régime was abolished. The sad use which had just been made of absolute power seemed to a great number of Haitians to condemn dictatorship. They believed that a change in the form of government would result in better direction of public affairs.

Pétion, who was military governor of the Western Province, used all of his influence to have the republican form of government adopted. He was fundamentally democratic and passionately devoted to the ideals of freedom, as he had proved in his youth. His liberalism had been strengthened during his stay in Paris by contact with men of the Revolution, who believed in the progress of democracy by the diffusion of the ideas of brotherhood. The Constituent Assembly, which met at Port-au-Prince in December, 1806, was composed mainly of his friends. It voted a constitution which took its inspiration, in its general outline, from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, for which the Revolution of Saint Domingue had been fought. The new constitution organized the Republic with the executive power delegated to a magistrate called the President of Haiti, who was elected for four years; the legislative power resided in a Senate of eighty members; and the judicial power was invested, except for minor magistrates, in judges named for life. By excessive reaction from the dictatorship, powers were accorded to the legislative body which gave it definite advantages over the President. It was in pursuance of this constitution that on December 28, 1806, Henri Christophe, General-in-Chief of the army, was elected President of Haiti.

Finding his powers too restricted by the republican constitution, Christophe isolated himself in the Northern Province, and on February 17, 1807, had a new constitution voted which named him president for life and generalissimo of the military and naval forces, with the right of choosing his successor from among the generals exclusively, and of designating the members of a Council of State, of which at least two thirds should be army men. In answer to this act, the Senate convened at Port-au-Prince, impeached Christophe, and elected on March 11, 1807, General Pétion President of the Republic of Haiti.

The government established in the North was a monarchy without the name. A law voted by the Northern Council of State, March 28, 1811, proclaimed Christophe King of Haiti under the name of Henri I. It accorded titles, prerogatives and hereditary immunities in his family, and for the legitimate male descendants in direct line, by right of seniority, to the exclusion of any female descendants. A nobility was established composed of princes of the blood of Christophe, dukes, counts, and barons. Landed property was set up in favor of the nobles of the kingdom.

Christophe governed his kingdom with an iron hand. But he proved himself to be an administrator of the first order. He created schools, built public roads, developed agriculture, encouraged industry. He built as a residence the magnificent palace of Sans-Souci, which was his Versailles and of which we can still admire the imposing ruins. Against the possibility of a return of the French, he built, on the top of a mountain

eight hundred sixty-five meters high, the Citadelle Laferrière, which has become one of the places most visited by American tourists today.

### III

Elected President of the Haitian Republic in January, 1807, Pétion was re-elected in March, 1811, and again in March, 1815. A new constitution voted in 1816, re-affirmed the principle of the separation of powers, re-organized the legislative body to be composed of a chamber of deputies and a senate. It established the presidency for a life term and gave to the head of the State the right to nominate his successor to the Senate, which alone was responsible for the presidential election. The establishment of the presidency for a life term was severely criticized. An impartial observer of Haitian life, the Englishman, Mark B. Bird, has written on this subject: "However pure and honest the motives may have been which led to the adoption of this principle, the wisdom of such a measure causes grave doubts. A president elected for a short term would have served as a safety valve by which might have escaped the extreme agitation of those fired by the legitimate ambition to reach this coveted post of honor. One may well question the wisdom of suppressing such a hope. Also, from that moment, there was always the fear that revolution might burst forth." As a matter of fact, the country was not lacking in men who, like Pétion, had rendered service to the cause of independence and who believed themselves as qualified as he, if not more so, to govern the country.

The administration of Pétion was marked by three acts of capital importance. First, the distribution of lands of the national domain to officers and soldiers of the Army of Independence, thus creating moderate and small rural estates. Second, the establishment at Port-au-Prince of a *lycée* for boys and a school of secondary education for girls, and the encouragement given by public education for the formation of an intellectual élite among Haitian youth. Third, the help given Simon Bolivar for the emancipation of the Spanish colonists of this hemisphere and for the abolition of slavery in South America.

The territory of the French colony of Santo Domingo had originally been divided into large domains belonging to a restricted class, that of the *grands planteurs* composed of the younger sons of the French aristocracy and of enriched colonists who with the labor of many slaves could exploit their plantations on a large scale. When Haiti proclaimed her independence, the plantations of the colonists were confiscated and became the property of the Haitian state. A few of the large estates were given to the commanding generals of the army.

Alexandre Pétion had the insight of genius. He understood that the

best means of developing national spirit was to attach the citizen to the soil by making him the owner of the land he cultivates. He saw also in such a measure the application of a principle of social justice. By a law in 1809, completed by another in 1814, Pétion contrived the division of the large colonial plantations and the distribution of the lots thus formed as "national gifts" to the lower officers and soldiers of the Army of Independence. Having thus created the small peasant farms, Alexandre Pétion could legitimately be called the founder of rural democracy in Haiti. Study of the economic organization of Haiti demonstrates the resistance which its peasant ownership of the soil and its plan of cultivating small farms was able to oppose to the world depression. It shows clearly that the agrarian problem, which is at the present moment the obsessing preoccupation of numerous American and European countries, has been solved by the black republic of the West Indies in the most democratic manner, and that by consequence Haiti is immune to communist revolution. The Haitian peasant is, in fact, highly individualistic and strongly opposed to all types of collectivism, except in the rudimentary form of cooperative work which they call *coumbite*.<sup>4</sup> Haiti is an agricultural country. Of its present population of three million inhabitants, two-thirds live in the country and cultivate the land. Three-quarters of the territory of the Republic belong with full rights of ownership to the Haitian peasants. This is the most certain safeguard of the security and stability of the state, for if Haiti has known in the past political and governmental instability, it has always had social stability, which is infinitely more precious.

Alexandre Pétion established, in the Constitution of 1816, the principle of free elementary education. It was to education especially that he gave his most solicitous attention. He was almost alone, among his intimate advisers, in thinking that public education should be the fundamental basis of any government program in a true democracy. In this belief he was strongly influenced by the ideas of Condorcet. He liked to repeat that education "raises man to the dignity of his being". And, since, as Descartes has said, "all our dignity is in our thought," Pétion believed that every human being, consequently every Haitian, has a right to intellectual development, a belief which implied for him universal education. He felt this diffusion of culture among the Haitian people all the more necessary because the partisans of slavery still continued to proclaim, as do the partisans of racialism today, that Negroes and descendants of Negroes are incapable of any mental development. That is why he was so anxious to establish secondary education leading to higher

<sup>4</sup>For the work of plowing or sowing, the farmers of one region meet and work successively in the field of each one, each giving food

and drink to his companions during the time they work for him. They call this *coumbite*.

studies. This, he felt, was indispensable for the creation of an intellectual élite and a Haitian culture. With this in view he created the *lycée* of Port-au-Prince. And more remarkable still, when we consider the ideas of his time regarding the education of girls, he founded the *Pensionnat National de Demoiselles* at Port-au-Prince.

Pétion proved that he did not desire freedom and independence for Haiti alone, but also for all those peoples who were burdened by the insufferable yoke of foreign domination. Simon Bolivar furnished him the opportunity to show his magnificent altruism in this respect. Imitating the example set by the founders of Haitian independence, the Venezuelan hero had undertaken to free his country from the domination of Spain. His first attempts failed. Accompanied by a large number of followers, he took refuge in Haiti during the last days of September, 1815. President Pétion gave him a cordial welcome and in order that he might begin again his struggle against the Spanish, he gave him money, arms, munitions, supplies and a little printing press. Some Haitians enlisted under Bolivar's flag. The latter, wishing to show his gratitude to Pétion and, as he himself expressed it in a letter of February 8, 1816, "leave to posterity an irrevocable monument to the Haitian President's philanthropy," desired that his benefactor be named as "the author of American liberty" in all solemn acts addressed to the inhabitants of Venezuela. In his answer of February 18, Pétion declined such an honor for himself, claiming as unique recompense for his aid, the proclamation of complete freedom of slaves in all those countries of America where the arms of the Liberator triumphed.

The little expedition left the port of Cayes, in the south of Haiti, in April, 1816. May 31, Bolivar landed at Carupano, after a short stop at the Ile Margarita. It was not until July 3, however, that he occupied Ocumare, and July 6, feeling that the moment had come to answer in a brilliant manner the request of President Pétion, he promulgated his famous proclamation decreeing the abolition of slavery in Spanish America. "Our unfortunate brothers," said he, "who are under the bond of slavery, are from this moment declared free. The laws of nature and humanity and the government itself proclaim their liberty. Henceforth, there will be in Venezuela only one class of inhabitants: all will be citizens."

This act marks a moment of exceptional importance in the history of the world: the official recognition in Spanish America of the rights of Negroes and those of African descent as men and citizens. Haiti is justly proud of having brought this about.

In a letter of October 9, 1816, Simon Bolivar expressed an appreciation of Pétion which merits quoting: "Your Excellency," wrote the Lib-



erator, "possesses a quality which is above empires, namely altruism. It is the President of Haiti alone who governs for the people. It is he alone who leads his equals. The other potentates, content to make themselves obeyed, scorn the love which makes your glory. The hero of the North, Washington, found only enemy soldiers to conquer. Your Excellency has all to conquer, enemies and friends, foreigners and countrymen, the fathers of the country and even the strength of his brothers. This task will not be impossible for Your Excellency, who is above his country and his epoch."<sup>5</sup>

In this curious letter, Bolivar discreetly made allusion to the trials and tribulations which the Haitian President suffered because of his own countrymen. He points out also the essential trait of Pétion's character: his kindness. This sentiment sometimes led him to excessive indulgence, to a tolerance which bordered on weakness. Totally unselfish, he gave liberally of all he possessed, and one had only to move his easy compassion to obtain the pardon of the most guilty persons. He had a deep love for the common people, who loved him in return and called him *papa bon-coeur*.

Having to face Christophe and the difficulties which he encountered in his own government, torn between his natural goodness and the exigencies of the powerful camarilla which had formed about him, grieved also perhaps by the treachery of the only woman he ever loved, the brilliant Joute Lachenais, Pétion felt himself discouraged. Weakened, he could not resist the illness which overcame him March 29, 1818, at the age of 48. His death caused an explosion of grief such as has never been witnessed in the history of Haitian leaders; for the people, and especially the peasants, adored him. And this soldier, who had taken part in so many battles, crushed so many revolts, struggled against so many adversaries, had as his funeral oration this spontaneous cry from a man of the people: "Pétion caused tears to flow only when he died."

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<sup>5</sup>The grateful Venezuelans have erected a statue to Pétion on the *Place d'armes* of their capital, Caracas.



ALEXANDRE SABÈS PÉTION

1770-1818

President of Haiti, 1807-1818

*Painting by Hale Woodruff after a print*



THE HAITIAN MAROON

(See Page 207)